

Personality: Roger Fotso

Rowena Quantrill

This is the first in an occasional series of articles introducing African ornithologists, conservationists and researchers. Contributions and suggestions for future 'personalities' are welcome and should be sent to the editorial address on the inside back cover of the Bulletin.

When Roger Fotso was young his parents' ambition was to see him become a doctor. They may have been surprised when Roger fulfilled their ambition not as a medical doctor but with a PhD in ornithology. Yet it was Roger's father, a school-teacher and artist, who first inspired his son's interest in the natural world which he taught him to observe and respect.

Roger Corneille Fotso was born in Baham, near Bafoussam in the West Province of Cameroon. He attended local primary and secondary schools, specialising in biology and maths at the latter. He was always interested in birds in a general way but it was when he continued to the University of Yaoundé to study biology and animal physiology that his interest was strengthened, encouraged by his practical classes and the enthusiasm of one of his lecturers, Jean-Paul Ducoux, who became his "bird mentor".

As part of his first degree Roger made a study of the birds on the Yaoundé University campus, an unexpected highlight of which was when an African *Pitta pitta angolensis* wandered into his laboratory! Continuing with his studies, Roger gained his maîtrise in zoology in 1986 and his Diplômes d'Etudes Approfondies in 1987.

From 1987 Roger lectured part-time at the university but at the same time began to deepen his knowledge and understanding of birds by camping alone for weeks at a time in the Kala and Elounden forests. It was here that he came across that strange bird, the Grey-necked Picathartes *Picathartes oreas*. Fascinated by the bizarre lifestyle of a bird which bounds across the forest floor in ungainly hops yet

builds mud nests on the walls of shallow caves and overhangs. Roger spent hours watching it and noting its behaviour, gaining a depth of knowledge which has made him one of the world's leading experts on the bird.



Roger and Jeanette Fotso (Rowena Quantrill)

Between 1990 and 1991 Roger experienced a very different forest environment when he became the ecologist on the BirdLife International project for the conservation of the montane forest ecosystem of Mt. Kilum in the North-West Province of Cameroon. Here he spent 11 months studying Bannerman's Turaco *Tauraco bannermani* and Banded Wattle-eye *Platysteira latycincta*, and helping to train local birders. Anyone visiting the area will realise the debt they owe Roger when they are taken up the mountain by one of the local guides, such as Ernest, whose interest and love for the birds has been inspired by Roger.

By now Roger was ready to continue his academic studies and he spent the next four years working for his PhD at the Zoological Institute, Faculty of Science, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, with frequent trips home for research as the subject of his thesis was the *Dynamique des peuplements d'oiseaux dans les séries écologiques de la région de Yaoundé (Sud Cameroun)*.

In 1994 Roger gained his doctorate and returned to Cameroon to work as research co-ordinator and scientific adviser for the Cameroon element of the European Union's ECOFAC

(Conservation and Sustainable Utilisation of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa) programme. His main area of research was the Dja Reserve where he discovered nesting colonies of *Picathartes* larger than any he had yet

come across. In 1998 he took up his present job—Co-Director Cameroon Biodiversity Programme, initiated and implemented by the Wildlife Conservation Society (founded in 1895 as the New York Zoological Society).

A long list of publications bear testimony to the value and weight of Roger's research but just as important is the part he has played in encouraging an interest in birds and in conservation among Cameroonians. To this end he helped found the Cameroon Ornithological

Society (COC) in 1995 and is now its acting President. He is also the BirdLife International representative in Cameroon, and a member of both the Pan-African Ornithological Congress and CARPE (Central African Regional Programme for the Environment) advisory board.

In 1996 Roger married Jeanette Nguiedem, who now works with him and says she is learning fast about birds! Roger still finds time for his other interests—soccer (watching more than playing these days) and dancing. He is also a talented artist and superb photographer as his photographs of Bannerman's Turaco and Grey-necked Picathartes hanging on the wall of our house in England demonstrate.

Anyone who attended the symposium on indigenous knowledge (to which Roger was a contributor and co-convenor) at the International Ornithological Congress in Durban, will have heard testimony to the need to tap into the wealth of local knowledge of birds which exists. It is people like Roger who are best placed to use this knowledge and to take the lead, as he is doing, in the conservation of the natural resources of his country. ☺